

how to get home by maxmayfield

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Summary:

When Mike found sunshine in the rain, he draped his coat around her shoulders.

how to get home

She was sunshine in the rain.

A girl adorned in yellow cotton, kissed by dewdrops, trembling in the cold.

“Take...” Mike began, but somehow lost his voice.

He had to fight to look away from her, to instead face his bickering friends. Their words were shaped like questions - for one another, for him, for the girl - but it seemed nobody had any answers.

“Take the light off her,” he managed to say.

Lucas and Dustin quieted with his command. The rays cast by their flashlights flickered away, so that all that was left was the moon.

Mike took a step towards the girl, tried for a reassuring smile when he noticed her stillness. It was too dark to tell, but her fists had unfurled.

“Um, hi,” he said, hesitation distorted by gentleness. “Do you need any help?”

His answer was in her eyes, the honey-coloured horror. She did not speak, and Mike had an idea as to why she could not bring herself to - she was alone, unaccompanied by an adult, dressed flimsily. It was clear to him that nobody was taking care of her; unclear to him, as to why he now felt it should be him.

“Are you lost?” he prompted her, trying to understand.

“Mike,” Lucas answered, from behind them. “Maybe we should go. We’ve got to find Will.”

Mike’s brow furrowed. “We can’t just leave her here!”

As he turned back to the girl, he saw that she was shivering, and reached for the zipper on his coat without a second thought. He draped its crinkly fabric across her shoulders, ignoring the bite of

cold against his throat.

Eleven looked up at him with eyes she hoped conveyed thankfulness. She could recognise that the coat was safe, because it smelled the same as the shirt that the nice man from before had given her. It did not smell clean, like blood and soap and steel, but like the earth, like dirt and sun and sky.

“Just follow us, okay?” Mike said, as his fingers fell away. “We’ll help you figure out how to get home.”

...

She caught the bathroom door when he tried to close it behind her. Bathed in the dull glow of the basement lamp, she stared at him with something of a challenge in her eyes. They were a softer shade of brown than his own, Mike realised, and held an uncommon depth.

“You don’t want it closed?” he asked, surprised.

“No,” she answered, lowering her gaze. Her voice was impossibly soft and sombre.

“Oh, so you can speak,” Mike said with a smile, more to himself than to her. “Okay, well, um...”

“How about... we keep the door... just like this?” he asked, pausing with each creak of wood, until there was an inch separating the door from its frame. “Is that better?”

He didn’t realise the meaning behind what he’d given her. In his unquestioned acceptance of her request, a choice.

“Yes,” she said, and felt her heart smiling, even if it didn’t show on her face.

...

The next morning, he saw El smile with teeth for the first time. She was rocking atop his father's La-Z-Boy, her cheeks pinched with dimples, made rosy in the rush of amusement. Mike was laughing, gangling hands bunched uselessly in his shirt. He spent the rest of the morning trying to make sense of it, of what it was about her smile that made him so happy.

He had yet to figure it out, when he heard his mother step through the front door.

"I won't tell her about you," he said, earnestly. "I promise."

"Promise?" she asked, bestowed with that perpetual look of caution.

He explained to her with hurried words, "It's something you can't break. Ever."

El still hesitated. She thought of cherry cans that curled in on themselves at the touch of fingerless hands, of the blue gore of her papa's gaze. She didn't know much - hadn't even known her own name, until the day before. But she held a quiet clarity in this, in that everything was breakable.

Still, she could not deny what was in Mike's eyes. They were dark as ever, entangled with stories, intents, and it was enough for El, in a way that she could not explain. So, she stepped into the wardrobe, into the darkness, and swathed her fear as the door closed behind her.

Almost at once, her hands and knees were shaking. Something eerie and blank dwelled in the wardrobe, gushed through El's chest, filled her fingertips with heave. There were arms tight around her elbows, ensnaring her wrists, and El thrashed, even knowing that she had no chance of escape. She could feel the shadow behind her, the gleam of expectation in his cool eyes.

It took little time for her to accept defeat. El was crying, hiccupping, her insides puddled airless in her stomach. Among the ghostly

silhouettes of the hung clothes, and of her own memories, she crumpled to her knees.

Then, there was a crack in the dark. The floating dust gleamed, aflame with new light.

It was the sun.

“El?”

It was him.

“Mike.”

...

One evening, he descended the staircase with his arms wound around a large bundle of blankets. El hadn't asked for them, despite how cold she had been the night before; he had brought them for her of his own accord.

“Just in case you need them,” Mike told her, frowning as he reached for the pillows in her fort. He started fluffing them, hoping to improve her sleeping space.

El wanted to thank him for all his efforts, but she was lost in contemplation, her own bafflement, unable to see any problem with the previous state of the pillows.

It was hard to make sense of it in her head, hard to find the words to describe why him doing this was so significant. Everything that Mike did seemed instilled with kindness. His care was fervent, abundant, and completely selfless.

He was *good*. The word didn't seem big enough to fit Mike, but it was the best word that El knew.

Making such a conclusion was not easy. There had been a handful of

people, from where she had come from, that seemed at first as though they might be nice. The emphasis of Mike's softness when in her presence, his particular gentleness with her, seemed even more suspicious. But her fear was ignored, traded for another instinct, the one that had understood Mike's goodness as soon as they had met.

She lets herself become distracted by what unfurled inside. Something daunting and unfamiliar, elicited by Mike, by how good he was, but also just because he was Mike, because she liked him. El liked him, in a baseless, ambiguous way, liked the things that he talked about and the way his forehead crinkled, his toys and his clothes and his stories. Also, she liked that he was pretty. El guessed that the blossoming had something to do with that, too, based on how much she liked the dots spattering his nose and cheeks.

"Is that better?" Mike asked, fumbling against the sheets as he hurried to shift away.

El nodded, distracted. As though unaware of what she was doing, she reached out and skimmed her fingertips across one of his cheekbones. She dropped her hand as suddenly as she had raised it, averting her eyes when Mike made a startled noise, a soft guffaw.

"Sorry," she murmured, embarrassed.

"Uh, no, that's okay," Mike said, quick to reassure her. He said nothing else, but El could sense his confusion, hear the question she knew he was too tactful to ask.

"They're like stars," she said, softly.

Mike didn't look any less confused by her explanation. The skin around his eyes furrowed as he studied her expression, trying to decipher her comment.

Muddled by her lack of success, El fiddled with her hands, gestured to Mike's face. "You have stars."

Splotches of pink bloomed beneath the constellations. "Oh. You mean my freckles?"

"Freckles," El repeated, intrigued. Too enraptured to indulge her

shyness, she reached out again, feathering his fingers over his flushed flesh.

Mike felt warm, overly aware of the edge that they teetered. He was young enough for it to be simple enough. For what impended to be true.

“Pretty,” El told him, looking at his eyes and not his freckles, before her fingers fell away.

...

In the basement before school, Mike knelt before El with earnest eyes.

“Stay down here, don’t make any noise, and don’t leave,” he said, pausing in his instructions to throw a sidelong glance at the table. “If you get hungry, eat Dustin’s snacks, okay?”

“Michael!” came a cry from above, the lady El knew to be Mike’s mama.

“Coming!” Mike shouted over his shoulder, where a moment ago he had been so gentle. His face smoothed over when he turned back to El, asked her, “You know those power lines?”

“Power lines?” El’s spoke very softly, and it made something tender trickle over Mike.

“Yeah,” Mike was unaware of the excess of his warmth. “The ones behind my house?”

“Yes.”

“Meet us there. After school,” Mike said.

“After school?”

“Yeah, 3:15.”

The numbers were meaningless to her. She looked at him blankly as she tried to find the words to convey this, but it only took a moment for Mike to figure it out on his own.

“Oh,” he said, reaching for the small black box perched atop his wrist. El watched as he unclasped the band it was attached to, and ignored the shift of her heart when his fingers brushed her skin to place the watch on the back of her hand.

“When the numbers read three one five, meet us there,” Mike told her.

“Three one five,” echoed El, studying the watch briefly before meeting his gaze again. A subtle smile curled over her features, the feeling behind it bordering on overwhelming.

“Three one five,” he affirmed, and then dashed away, scooping his backpack off the floor and hurrying up the staircase after his friends.

The day passed slowly. There was little to do in the basement, as El had passed restless nights inspecting its every corner, and now knew it well. She was plagued by a desperate curiosity for the world above her fortress, wondering about the contents of the rest of the house. Her fascination was endless, over just how different everything was - even if it was also sometimes very terrible, as El discovered when the coke commercial played on the screen in the living room.

For the rest of the day, El was shaken. She traversed the remaining rooms with jittering fingers, curiosity undeterred even as a streak of terror begged her to return to the safety of the blanket fort Mike had made for her. She felt consumed by wistfulness, when she found a porcelain ballerina boxed in the pretty bedroom belonging to Mike’s sister.

It was a relief when the numbers on her wrist began nearing three one five. As she made her way outside, El found herself quietly mumbling the string of numbers, reassuring herself that she had gotten them right, that the boys would be there soon.

The cat appeared by the power lines some minutes before 3:15, slithering under the fence and hissing at the sound of El's footfalls. El startled, twisting to look at the animal. Its stare was hateful, as if it somehow knew.

El took a step away from the cat. Something detached urged her not to hurt the cat, tasted blood so stark it seemed fresh. But it was old blood, dead blood, a stain at the back of her throat she feared she would never unstick. She swallowed the salt, tried not to think of the stone walls and the broken men, memories blurred at the edges.

Dazed, she turned to the sky. The sun crept behind vast clouds, shining with colourless illuminance. It was the most natural white that El had ever seen. The stillest brightness that she had ever known.

"El!"

The sound of his voice brought her back. She watched her new friends ascending the hill, pushing their bikes among the grass.

"You okay?" Mike called, noticing her tense posture.

El thought for a moment, then nodded. The fear that had settled stubbornly within her earlier that day was suddenly, inexplicably apparent. She was okay, now.

...

There was blood on his chin.

She noticed it as soon as they began their walk, the piece of unpeeled skin, and the unease it spurred for her. She wanted to ask him about it, but he was impossibly pretty beneath the wreath of blue clouds, with his hair soft around his temples, and his coat neat on his shoulders. He still seemed unreal in spirit, a fantasy. It made her feel shy.

It wasn't until they'd been walking for several miles, until Dustin and Lucas were far enough away to be unable to overhear, that El gathered the courage to speak.

"Why do they hurt you?"

"What?" Mike asked, confused, but sagged with understanding when she gestured to his chin. "Oh, that. Uh, I just fell at recess."

With her eyes cast downwards, El almost smiled. She knew that friends didn't lie, but this didn't seem like a betrayal to her. She understood, and was somewhat amused, by the familiarity of things feigned where people who seemed bigger were concerned.

"Mike," she said.

"Yeah?" he responded, staring at his handlebars.

"Friends tell the truth," she reminded him.

Mike sighed, defeated. "I was tripped by this mouth breather, Troy, okay?"

"Mouth breather?"

"Yeah, you know," he said, shoulders lifting. "A dumb person. A knucklehead."

"A knucklehead," El mused.

"I don't know why I didn't just tell you..." he said, sighing once more. "Everyone at school knows. I just didn't want you to think I was such a wastoid, you know?"

He punctuated his words with a nervous chuckle. It was the most familiar of phenomena, in this big new world of El's.

"Mike," she prompted.

"Yeah?"

"I understand," she told him, and in such a simple statement, in the

intensity of her stare, made her meaning clear, had everything unsaid heard. The sincerity was blazing.

“Oh, okay.” Mike was somewhat floored. “Cool.”

“Cool,” El agreed, smiling on the inside and the outside all at once.

She was too bright to look at, and he had to look away. A moment afterwards, he chanced looking back at her, and found his smile mirrored on her face. He found that the sun and his heart were entwined in her eyes. He found the sensation of free fall.

...

The radio was solid and scratchy in either set of her hands. The tangible ones felt the box, and the others felt the jarring buzz. She knew that the scratchiness she felt when fiddling its buttons was something most people could not sense. It was only energy.

Sitting on the other side of the basement, Mike heaved with hushed anguish. He had scrubbed his tears before coming to see her, but El could still see the glistening paths they had traced on his skin. It was clear that he was *sad*, the word El had that never seemed to encapsulate all she felt, and this, for some reason, was much more painful for El than the thought of him being angry at her.

“Maybe you thought you were helping, but you weren’t,” Mike was saying. “You hurt me. Do you understand?”

She didn’t.

She thought of the mistakes she had made in the lab and of what had happened to Benny, and was not surprised that she had done something wrong. But she was confused, because it was less obvious than usual, what it had been. Will had been hiding, yes, but he had been there, and wasn’t that what Mike wanted?

His words in her ears made her feel sick. She tried to remind herself

that he hadn't asked her to go back into the wardrobe.

You hurt me began to echo, and her hands began to shake. She looked at Mike, donned in knitted green and unable to meet her eyes, and reached deeper inside.

She twisted the static into Will.

...

They made a normal girl out of her, a girl defined by strangeness. They dusted her livelier, shrouded her in silk and gloss. Since emerging from the doorway, pink and transformed, Mike had to make an effort not to look for too long.

He was not entranced by the new blatancy of her prettiness, something that was distracting, but not unrealised. He knew that he had been staring for days, now.

It was the sight of El gathered among his peers, wearing a proper dress, with blonde hair curling past her jaw. She was, for all appearances, an ordinary schoolgirl, dutifully attending assembly - and, for her bright eyes, her florid cheeks, anything but.

For the dozenth time since sitting down in the gym, Mike forced himself to look away. It was no secret that crushes were embarrassing, but this was different. This was dire.

This was strange. Strange, that after they had set El in front of the Heathkit ham shack something inside Mike was galvanised, unable to stomach her position, demanding that he do something to prevent this from happening. Strange, to realise that however desperate he was to save Will, he was not willing to put El at risk.

She seemed unperturbed by such a concern. Her eyes were closed, and her face was furrowed in concentration.

"She's doing it," Mike said, anxiety replaced by a brief flash of awe.

“She’s finding him!”

Above El’s blonde head, a light bulb shattered, veiling the room’s light. The speakers around her spilled with static, garbling frequencies and then Will’s voice, before abruptly bursting into sparks and catching fire.

Startled, Mike backed away, as Lucas yelled in surprise and Dustin rushed for the fire extinguisher, wielding it against the impending flames. Dread overcame Mike when he realised that El was slumped in her chair, that blood was smeared across her lip.

He flitted towards her, grappling for her arm and whirling her chair to face him, staring with panicked eyes. Like desperation, he demanded, “El, are you okay?”

The only response she could manage was to look at him. Somehow, the veins beneath her eyes had become very distinct, and the pallor of her skin had greyed. The elicited horror was unparalleled, unbearable. Another new extent of feeling, unknown before El.

...

Mere moments after yelling at her, Mike was engulfed by regret. He reflected and realised that everything she had done that day, from tampering with the compasses to throwing Lucas off of him during their fight, had been in what she thought was his best interest. El had been trying to protect him, trying to protect all of them, if in an unguided way. But he knew better than to expect more of her than that - he knew that she came from a bad place of bad men, that she didn’t know what a friend was. He knew that what kindness she *was* capable of, unguided or no, was astounding.

All afternoon, he stomped across the floor of the woods shouting El’s name, consumed by panic, by determination. Dustin was panting behind him, kept on having to jog to keep up with him, despite Mike always having been the slowest in the group.

“Mike,” he called. “C’mon, buddy, we’ve gotta go home. It’s getting dark.”

“I don’t care,” Mike responded, knuckles tightening by his sides.

“We can come back tomorrow,” Dustin suggested. “It’s not like she’s completely helpless out here, or anything - you know, she has her powers. But if *we* stay out here, and whatever took Will turns up - ”

“What, so her safety is less important than ours?!” Mike cut him off, blistering.

Dustin arched an exasperated eyebrow at him, answering in a low mocking voice, “*No, Mike, I’m not saying that.* Obviously. But she’s better off out here than we are, and that’s just a fact. Or have you forgotten, that she has freaking *telekinesis*?”

“That isn’t going to keep her warm, or get her food,” Mike said impatiently. “You go home if you want, Dustin, but I’m not leaving until I find El.”

Then, before Dustin could reply, Mike started calling for her again, at the top of his lungs.

He looked for her until the sun was swallowed by the black. There were stars woven among the brambles of the trees, by the time that his knees finally gave in. His throat burned, his feet ached, and his cheeks stung with the wind. Dustin grew firm, taking Mike by the shoulders and turning them back towards their bikes. Mike ambled alongside him, doing his best to stifle his tears.

“I can’t just - ” he kept on saying, eyes frantic along the trees. “I can’t just give up on her.”

“No, we can’t,” Dustin agreed. “I promise, Mike, we’ll come back first thing tomorrow. And we *will* find her.”

They found her the next day, as Dustin had promised - or rather, she found them.

She collapsed by the cliff’s edge, exhausted by her efforts, with her shattered heart pooling in her eyes. She spoke of monsters and Mike

refuted with heroes, before pulling her into his arms. She was held firmly where she belonged - enfolded among her friends - for a moment that was still and steady.

They walked side by side on the way home, Mike's fingers lingering by but not touching El's wrist. Mike was quieter than usual as the three friends spoke, voices hushed with relief and light with ease. He was searching for the words to redeem his shame, the question he had asked three times too many and felt desperate to correct.

"There's..." he began, quiet and hesitant. "Um, there's nothing wrong with you, El. You know that, right? That... That I was only asking you that because I was worried? About my friends?"

Dustin, who had been chortling at a joke he had told just before Mike spoke, looked up with surprise at his best friend. El was nodding, despite not knowing this about herself, at all.

"I have a real temper," Mike continued to explain. "When I get angry, I sort of... overreact. I say things I don't mean and get really worked up over stuff that doesn't matter. Right, Dustin?"

"Holy shit, yeah!" Dustin concurred, nodding furiously. "He is a *nightmare*, El, I'm telling you. One time I knocked his ice cream out of the cone, and he didn't speak to me for an entire week!"

"That was like, fourth grade, Dustin!" Mike protested, rolling his eyes before addressing El again. "The point is, I didn't mean what I said to you. There's nothing wrong with you, okay?"

"He's right," Dustin added, grinning at her. "You're awesome."

El smiled, too, looking tired but happy. "Okay."

...

The brush of the cloth against her cheek was tentative. Mike was careful in rubbing it against her face, trying to remove the dirt. It still

felt strange, being cared for like this, but El was growing sure that it was safe, that Mike's benignity was dependable.

"That's better," he sighed.

The mirror told her that she no longer looked dirty, but El still somehow felt it, staring at her ashen reflection. She frowned as she lifted one hand to her scalp, her fingers ghosting her hairline.

Out before he knew it, Mike told her, "You don't need it."

She looked to him and then back to herself, asking, "Still pretty?"

He thought of the day before, of the girl in the rose dress standing in the doorway. He had breathlessly voiced his thoughts before hastening to conceal his feelings, and she had glowed with her small smile, the stolen moment of happiness.

Now, Mike felt that pretty didn't say enough about her doe eyes and button nose, the pink tinge to her skin. She reminded him of the princesses from his old storybooks, something enchanting and unbelievable that - until now - existed only in childhood.

"Yeah!" Mike exclaimed, gushed. "Pretty, *really* pretty."

He watched the unwithheld return of her glowing smile, and noticed that something was stirring inside him. He thought of what mattered more than being pretty, her gentleness, her strength, her curiosity. How quickly she absorbed his explanations for her questions, intelligence contrasting a lack of knowledge. Without considering her powers and the lab, she was unlike anyone he had ever met, and Mike was mesmerised.

"El?" he said, his need to say something overriding his shyness.

"Yes?"

"Um, I'm happy you're home."

He was unaware of what he had just confessed, what he had given her. El was struck by incredulity, the usual disbelief of his existence flaring.

There was no question in his eyes: this was her home. He truly believed that, and even seemed to want it. El was utterly overwhelmed. She knew that the words to adequately thank him didn't exist, and so settled on what small response she could make out.

"Me too."

When Mike looked at her, El's gaze had deepened, and he realised just how dry his lips had become, and just how badly he wanted to be close to her. He was unsure what he was doing, moving closer, but he had something to mimic, memories here and there, and the push of where his heart was pointing. El didn't know what was coming, but she understood that which they skirted, following him without question.

They leaned in closer, and his eyelids were half-closed, heavy, when the door burst open.

...

She was pulled out of the bath and reaching for Mike, her eyes glazed over and her hands heavy. Her exhaustion was palpable as she was set against him, as her head found the cradle of his shoulder and she laid there wearily, sitting in the usual Mike-elicited relief.

They were hiding, but not as well as Will. They were on the same plain as the bad men, susceptible to anything that might happen if someone came to the school and saw them.

The boys thought that Will's mother, Joyce, and the police chief, Hopper, were going to save them. El could tell that Mike did not harbour the hopefulness of his friends. He kept on stealing worried glances at her, his eyes full of words he could not say.

It made El feel sad and guilty. She knew that if she had she never come to the basement, these boys would never have been in this position, would never have been so scared.

The ache worsened when Mike began to shake beneath her, checking his watch and fidgeting as he looked over the room in worry. She wanted to tell him that it was okay, that she would do everything that she could to help - but she was so tired. The bath had taken a lot out of her, and she wasn't sure if she would be able to save them, this time.

The powerlessness was familiar. It was usually enough to stifle any semblance of comfort, countered only by Mike's presence, and the fact that he was more than enough to lessen any amount of grief.

...

He was moonlight in the daytime. A beaming light in an abyss of darkness.

A boy with ebony eyes and lily skin, cratered with blue. He held her hand as the world flickered, bullets staining the walls with spilled ash and lost hope.

"Just hold on a little longer, okay?" Mike was pleading of her, as she withered atop the table. "He's gone. The bad man's gone. We'll be home soon, and my mum... she'll get you your own bed. You can eat as many Eggos as you want. And we can go to the Snow Ball."

El could feel the vein in his wrist pulsing on her skin, the weight of his heart where it poked against her ribs. Her fingers tightened in the crooks of his.

"Promise?" she whispered.

"Promise." His lips chapped and ajar, his hesitance clear. But he could not help himself, could not bring himself to deny her this.

El knew that it was a promise broken before it was made, but she didn't mind. She understood.

Mike was her first friend, her best friend. Mike, who was good

without having a reason to be, who heard her when she spoke without words as well as he did when she used her voice. He had sheltered her from the cold, the wet, had defended her against his friends, had kissed her and invited her to a school dance. And, he was a thief - he had stolen her, a wilted ray of sunlight he had found in the rain.

He was how to get home. And this was why she knew, she had to say goodbye.

Author's Note:

I know this is a bit different, it's more world exploration for me, finding character voices for future stories. I haven't written in a while and this really made me happy! Thanks for reading <3